Teaching language skills

Jonathan Newton

Introduction

Over the past century, language teaching methods have tended to emphasise certain of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing while downplaying the role of others. For instance, the grammar-translation method, popular in Western language education during the early twentieth century, placed great importance on reading and writing, with a focus on sentence level grammar and translation practice. In contrast, the direct method emphasised learning through oral communication, typically in the form of teacher-directed question-and-answer dialogues. The audiolingual method, which emerged in the mid-twentieth century, focused on carefully controlled speaking practice via drills and scripted dialogues; the role of listening was primarily to provide a model for speaking. In a dramatic contrast, comprehension-based approaches inspired largely by Krashen’s influential monitor hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) insisted on the necessity and sufficiency of understanding input (i.e. listening and reading for meaning) for acquiring a second language. Consequently, speaking and writing were relegated to secondary roles. Summing up these pendulum swings, Celce-Murcia (2001: 3) comments that “language teaching is a field in which fads and heroes have come and gone in a manner fairly consistent with the kinds of changes that occur in youth culture”. Adamson (2006: 615) argues, however, that language teaching fashions are not random but “mirrors of the contemporary sociocultural climate”. (See Hall, this volume, ch. 15 for further discussion of language teaching methods and language teaching ‘fashions’.)

How does all this inform the teaching of language skills at this point, early in the twenty-first century? More than ever, the English language teaching profession is able to draw on a large body of recent multi-disciplinary scholarship from fields such as linguistics, applied linguistics, psychology, cognitive science and education, and so, arguably, to distance itself from reactive methods trends. But while such scholarship has made a huge contribution to our understanding of the four skills and how to teach them, we are some way from consensus on many of the critical issues. Not surprisingly, then, addressing in a single chapter the wide-ranging, multifaceted topic of teaching language skills is not without its challenges, including how to do justice to the range of issues and debates on any one of the four skills, let alone all four. But along with this challenge comes the opportunity to explore synergies across the various skill areas. The chapter begins with a discussion of issues common across the four skills before looking at each skill in turn. It concludes with a discussion of future directions in teaching language skills.
Critical issues in teaching skills

The nature and role of practice

Skills are not innate; they are learned through practice (Proctor and Dutta, 1995), typically in the form of focused rehearsal of the sub-skills which make up skilled performance, e.g. learning to perfect a tennis stroke involves practising sub-skills such as adopting a particular grip, learning to position feet and body and automatising the mechanics of the stroke itself. In language learning, practice can be defined as “specific activities in the second language, engaged in systematically, deliberately, with the goal of developing knowledge of and skills in the second language” (DeKeyser, 2007: 1). We see this view of practice in the well-known ‘presentation, practice and production’ (PPP) approach to language teaching, in which the practice stage involves careful, controlled rehearsal of discrete language structures and/or functions. The aim is for the learner to proceduralise declarative knowledge of targeted forms and functions (e.g. that in English we use verb stem +ed to mark past action) prior to (supposedly) being able to use these forms with ease and accuracy in the third stage of production/communicative performance.

The value of this type of practice is hotly debated in ELT. It has suffered from association with behaviourist theories of learning and from its link to the largely discredited belief that language is best acquired through careful, sequentially staged practice of rule-based structures (Skehan, 1996; Doughty, 2003; Klapper, 2003). While advocates of PPP treat communicative use of language as a goal or outcome of practice, others, especially those who advocate task-based approaches, such as Willis and Willis (2007), see communicative use as essential to the whole learning process, and even as a preferred starting point (see Van den Branden, this volume, for further discussion of task-based language teaching).

But in rejecting practice by association, we run the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. As Gatbonton and Segalowitz (2005) argue, ELT practitioners in the communicative language teaching (CLT) paradigm have largely failed to effectively integrate practice into communicative teaching. As a result, teachers too often fall back on the kind of repetitive pattern practice that scholars such as DeKeyser (1998) argue is of little value. Gatbonton and Segalowitz propose an alternative to the PPP approach under the acronym ACCESS – automatization in communicative contexts of essential speech elements. As the name suggests, in this approach, learners always practice useful utterances in the context of genuine communication. The approach consists of three phases, each involving communication activities: a creative automatisation phase in which essential speech segments are elicited; a language consolidation phase in which learners strengthen control of these utterances; and a free communication phase. A justification for this performance-oriented view of practice can be seen in the transfer-appropriate processing (TAP) model of memory (Goldstein, 2008) which, in simple terms, states that the way we process information determines the facets we will remember/get better at. For teaching language skills, the implication is that the kind of processing required in a target task should be mimicked in the classroom practice activities that are intended to prepare for that task; learners need opportunities to practice the performance. This is in many ways implicit in much of CLT in the use of role plays and other forms of group work. The TAP model provides one explanation for why form-focused drills are not adequate preparation for communicative performance, a point that DeKeyser (1998) argues persuasively.

So while it is clear that some form of practice is central to teaching language skills, just what kind of practice is appropriate and the extent to which practice should be separate or integrated into communicative use are issues of ongoing debate (see also Collins and Marsden, this volume, for further discussion of ‘practice’). Similarly there are differing positions on how teaching
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should address bottom-up and top-down processing skills in relation to listening and reading, a topic we turn to next.

**Bottom-up and top-down processes**

A key issue in teaching the language skills concerns how much teachers should focus on top-down processing skills such as global comprehension of whole texts, on the assumption that, in the process, sub-skills will take care of themselves. In top-down processes, we draw meaning from around or outside a text (e.g. from topic-related background knowledge and experience) to help make sense of it. For example, a listener or reader draws on prior knowledge and on content and rhetorical schemata to construct meaning. These processes are largely inferential — the listener/reader draws on what they know of the context of communication to construct a representation of the message that is simultaneously emerging from the text. In the classroom, top-down processing is encouraged by getting learners to listen or read about a topic which is familiar to them, where the organisation and other genre conventions are familiar to them, where their attention is strongly focused on the message and where there is not a concern for linguistic detail.

Alternatively, we might approach skill learning in a different way — to what extent do learners benefit from practising bottom-up processing skills? Bottom-up processes are those by which we extract information from the linguistic elements in a written or spoken text to construct meaning. In listening, for example, bottom-up processes involve perceiving and parsing incoming speech and attending to auditory-phonetic, phonemic, syllabic, lexical, syntactic and semantic information to do so (Rost, 2011). Similarly, for reading, bottom-up processes include word recognition (and the sub-processes this implies), lexico-syntactic processing (e.g. processing affixes/stems, phrases and clauses) and semantic processing (e.g. assembling propositions) (Grabe and Stoller, 2011). For the proficient language user, these processes are fast and require little conscious awareness or effort. However, for the language learner, these processes are typically slower and require much more conscious effort. In the context of meaning-focused language use, this leads to an inevitable trade-off between the attention the learner has available for bottom-up processing on the one hand and for higher order sense-making processes on the other. Practice devoted to bottom-up processes would seem a natural response to this issue.

However, widely adopted communicative approaches to teaching the receptive skills have tended to place a much greater emphasis on top-down skills, with rather less attention paid to the skills and knowledge required for fast, accurate processing of the linguistic elements in the input. Such approaches emphasise global listening, skimming/scanning skills, making predictions and constructing meaning from context cues in and beyond the text, and drawing on personal experience of the topic to make sense of input. We see parallels to this approach in Krashen’s (1982) input hypothesis, in which he argued that the most important process for acquiring a second language was comprehending meaningful input through listening and reading for meaning. Consequentially, he argued, teachers should deliberately avoid detailed explication of the formal properties of that input. However, Krashen’s claims, and teaching approaches that followed from them, have been widely criticised on both theoretical and empirical grounds. A key weakness is that they fail to provide L2 learners with sufficient opportunities to develop the necessary sub-skills for L2 listening (Field, 2008; Vandergrift and Goh, 2012; Cauldwell, 2013) and reading (Bernhardt, 1991; Segalowitz and Hulstijn, 2005). For instance, Field (2011) argues that many of the comprehension activities used in classrooms to teach listening, such as answering questions about the meanings in a text, focus too much on the product of listening (i.e. comprehension) and so fail to help learners with the listening process. In short, as Field notes, such activities confuse teaching listening with testing listening.
As we shall see in the following sections, for both listening and reading, research evidence shows conclusively that bottom-up and top-down processes do not occur independently but are interactive and recursive. The implication for teaching is clear; learners need opportunities for guided practice of bottom-up and top-down processing strategies both separately and in concert.

Teaching the four skills

The following sections discuss each skill in turn, beginning with the two receptive skills of listening and reading before addressing the productive skills of speaking and writing.

Teaching listening skills

Cauldwell (2013: 6) describes the kind of comprehension approach advocated by Krashen (see above) and prevalent in many published textbooks as “an over-reliance on osmosis”; that is, it works on the maxim “listen a lot and your listening skills will improve automatically”. Cauldwell contends that such an approach draws too heavily on research into the role of listening in first language acquisition and so overlooks the importance for L2 learners of instruction in speech perception processes. As Vandergrift and Goh (2012: 4) claim, “compared with writing and reading, or even speaking, . . . the development of listening has received the least systematic attention from teachers and instructional materials.”

To what extent might learners benefit from being taught how to listen in a second language? Cauldwell (2013) argues that direct and deliberate teaching of perceptual processing skills is essential but that teachers need to better understand the phonology of fast speech in order to carry it out. Field (2003) also advocates more attention to bottom-up listening skills so as to assist learners with lexical segmentation – with parsing the speech stream so as to distinguish word boundaries. Field identifies three speech phenomena that make lexical segmentation particularly difficult for language learners and which therefore require attention through explicit instruction: (1) reduced forms (i.e. contractions such as I’d, weak forms such as unstressed articles, and chunks such as Howyadoing? – ‘How are you doing?”); (2) assimilation and elision (i.e. changes to the beginnings and endings of words in connected speech, e.g. this show – thi show); and (3) resyllabification (i.e. past her-> pastor). Lynch and Mendelsohn (2002: 207) suggest a similar but expanded range of instructional targets: discriminating between similar sounds; coping with and processing fast speech; processing stress and intonation differences; processing the meaning of different discourse markers; and understanding communicative functions and the non-one-to-one equivalence between form and function (e.g. a declarative sentence such as It’s cold in here performing a directive function Please close the window). These authors support teachers taking more time to raise awareness of such speech phenomena and to provide opportunities for learners to develop control over perceptual processes through activities such as dictations and repeated listening to authentic speech samples.

Skilled listening is, of course, more than successfully segmenting the speech stream. As Vandergrift (2007: 193) notes, skilled L2 listening also involves “a skilful orchestration of metacognitive and cognitive strategies”. Raising learners’ metacognitive awareness of how they listen and how to effectively manage the listening process are, therefore, important teaching goals (Vandergrift and Goh, 2012). To illustrate the point, a study by Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010) showed that tertiary French as a second language students who were given metacognitive listening strategy training outperformed their peers in subsequent listening comprehension tests. The training led the learners through the metacognitive processes characteristic of successful L2 listening, including predicting, monitoring, evaluating and problem-solving. The authors conclude that
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listening performance improves when “listening practice includes opportunities to explain or reflect on the decisions required during the listening task” (p. 488).

By way of summary, and building on all these themes, Newton (2009) argues that to be effective, a listening programme should include five core components: extensive meaning-focused listening; guided diagnosis of miscomprehension problems; listening skills training and practice; listening strategy training; and making links to listening opportunities beyond the classroom.

Teaching reading skills

As with listening, teaching reading skills requires the teacher to be familiar with the range of lower and higher level processes that make up skillful reading and with how to sequence teaching to ensure learners have opportunities to develop skilful control over these processes. Drawing on an extensive review of L2 reading research, Grabe and Stoller (2011: 130) identify the following list of abilities L2 readers need to develop: efficient word recognition and automatic access to a large vocabulary; reading comprehension skills for extracting meaning from phrase, clause, paragraph and discourse text structures; applying reading strategies to difficult texts; setting and adjusting reading goals; inferencing and using prior knowledge; synthesizing these processes for critical reading comprehension; and maintaining motivation to read extensively and for an extended period of time. Although this list seamlessly integrates bottom-up and top-down reading processes, the reading teacher is still faced with the question of how much emphasis to place on deliberate teaching and practice of reading sub-skills in comparison to other components such as extensive reading and comprehension-based reading activities. To help answer this question, we will now turn our attention to lower level (i.e. bottom-up) reading processes.

Skilled L2 readers activate highly automatized bottom-up text processing skills to make sense of text and to serve higher level comprehension and inferential goals (Hulstijn, 1991; 2001). This is a different picture of reading to that proposed by Goodman (1967), who claimed that effective readers draw on higher level processing skills to shortcut lower level text processing. In fact, a lack of automatic word recognition skills greatly hinders the reading process. Without these skills, the learner’s attention to higher level text processing is compromised by fixations on problematic surface structures. Readers facing such challenges read more slowly (and by implication, less) and at lower levels of comprehension.

One priority for learners seeking to improve reading skills is therefore developing automaticity (i.e. fluency) in word recognition so as to free up cognitive resources for comprehending and interpreting text (Segalowitz and Hulstijn, 2005). In a study involving Japanese university students, Akamatsu (2008) showed that training in word-recognition through a word chains task in which the students drew lines to separate words written with no spaces led to improved word-recognition performance in both speed and accuracy. Furthermore, as Grabe and Stoller (2011: 13) note, “reading is fundamentally a linguistic process . . . though this aspect of reading is often downplayed.” For teachers, this means helping learners to adopt efficient vocabulary learning strategies to rapidly expand their vocabulary knowledge. Research shows that an effective way to achieve this is through deliberate word learning using flash cards, combined with extensive reading of appropriately graded readers in which these words are met in meaningful contexts (Nation, 2013).

In fact, extensive reading is widely regarded by reading and vocabulary researchers as the cornerstone to developing reading ability and a wide vocabulary (Grabe and Stoller, 2011; Waring, 2012). Unfortunately, however, as Waring notes, extensive reading is too often treated as supplementary to a main programme, an option to be omitted if there is no time for it. Considering
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Since the heyday of CLT in the 1970s, most approaches to teaching speaking skills have sought to engage learners in meaning-focused, communicative tasks in one way or another (see Thornbury, this volume, for further discussion of CLT). A key issue of debate is where this communicative practice belongs in a teaching/learning cycle, an issue we met earlier in this chapter in the discussion of the role of practice in language teaching. A closely related issue concerns how teachers can ensure due attention is given to different aspects of speaking, namely to complexity (grammatical and lexical), accuracy and fluency (CAF). In what is known as the trade-off hypothesis, Skehan (1998) argues that these dimensions compete for the learner’s limited cognitive resources and that the type of classroom activities teachers set for learners and how these activities are implemented will lead learners to give preferential attention to certain of the three CAF components, but not to all three. This has important implications for teaching speaking. For example, research has shown that when learners are provided with planning time prior to performing an oral production task, their language production tends to be more fluent and either more accurate or more complex, but not both (Skehan and Foster, 1999). Factors such as what type of planning is provided and how complex the task is also have a strong effect on how

the strength of the evidence for its benefits, Waring argues that extensive reading should be at the core of every reading programme.

Opportunities for repeated reading have also been shown to improve reading fluency and to improve comprehension. For instance, a study by Gorsuch and Taguchi (2008) showed that Vietnamese university EFL students improved both their reading fluency and text comprehension though a repeated reading procedure which involved reading a short, simplified text five times. However, neither this or Akamatsu’s (2008) study noted previously present a viable pedagogic proposal for automatising word recognition. They offer useful research techniques, but these are of limited practical use in a typical EFL situation. In this regard, extensive reading remains the strongest contender.

A key issue facing the reading teacher is the extent to which L2 learners can access their L1 reading skills when reading in the L2 (Carrell, 1991; Bernhardt and Kamil, 1995; Walter, 2007). Scholars agree that, although L1 and L2 reading draw on the same underlying cognitive processes, learners need to achieve a threshold level of L2 proficiency in order to access their L1 reading skills. Below that level, access is constrained by lack of automaticity of basic local text decoding skills such as letter and word recognition, which rob attention in working memory. However, just what that threshold level is has proved difficult to define. Related factors such as the linguistic difference between L1 and L2 and the social context of education in both languages (including differences in valued literacy practices in both languages) also impact strongly on L2 reading (Grabe and Stoller, 2011).

Finally, a challenge for teaching reading skills is that reading not only involves a complex array of sub-processes such as those listed above, but reading is done for many different purposes involving many different text types, all of which shape the process of reading. We read a newspaper story for a different purpose and thus in a different way from the way we read a poster, an Internet page, a technical manual, a cartoon, an email message and so on. With forms of digital text continuing to expand, this complexity is also increasing. And as digital literacy is incorporated into the goals of ELT reading instruction, it brings heightened levels of intertextuality and text-reader interactivity, which in turn offer new opportunities and challenges for the teaching of reading skills.

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learners allocate their attention to these three aspects of speaking. We now turn to look more closely at teaching focused on one of these aspects – teaching to develop spoken fluency.

ELT curricula typically identify the language content and skills to be taught and learnt in a programme. What may be less clearly articulated are the opportunities available for learners to develop fluent control over this material in order to perform at a higher skill level. This is a problem for learners; if the items that have been learned are not readily available for fluent use, then the learning has been for little purpose. At its simplest level, to develop fluency requires extensive and often repetitive practice. This would not be seen as unusual for anyone learning a musical instrument or a sport. And yet, in ELT, it is an often overlooked component of teaching. Why? There are no doubt many reasons. Curricula may simply underestimate the amount of effort required to build fluency, or, given constrained classroom time, teachers may view fluency as the learners’ responsibility. Also, in many parts of the world, high stakes assessment does not give due weight to speaking. And finally, the kind of communicative activities associated with fluency are often seen as impractical in the large classes typical of ELT in many parts of the world (see Shamim and Kuchah, this volume for further discussion of teaching large classes).

How can teachers help learners to develop communicative fluency without reverting to demotivating, repetitive form-practice? Research indicates that spoken fluency is likely to develop if three main conditions are met (Nation and Newton, 2009). First, the activity must be meaning focused so that the learners are communicating a message and experiencing the ‘real time’ pressures of normal communication. Second, the learners should take part in activities where all the language items are within their previous experience. This means that the learners work with largely familiar topics and types of discourse which make use of known vocabulary and structures. Third, there is support and encouragement for learners to perform at a higher level; for instance, they are encouraged to use larger planned chunks of language (i.e. formulaic sequences) (Wood, 2006), they are given planning time or they are encouraged to increase the speed at which they produce or comprehend text. Increased speed can be achieved through a timed or speed reading programme, or in the case of speaking, through the timed 4–3–2 speaking activity which we will discuss next.

The 4–3–2 activity meets all three conditions for fluency development outlined previously (meaningful, familiar topic/language, pressure to improve performance) and so is worth looking at in some detail. In this activity, learners give a short talk on a familiar topic three times consecutively, each time to a different partner, and with the time reducing from four to three to two minutes on each occasion. De Jong and Perfetti (2011: 31) carried out an empirical study into the effects of the 4–3–2 activity on spoken fluency. Using intermediate ESL students at a US university, they compared the performance of students who performed the activity (as described above) with students who spoke on a new topic each time. They found that while fluency increased for both groups, only the group who spoke on the same topic each time maintained their improved fluency on a post-test in which they gave a two-minute talk on a new topic. They conclude that “[s]peech repetition in the 4/3/2 task may cause changes in underlying cognitive mechanisms, resulting in long-term and transferable effect on performance fluency”. This is an important outcome for teachers who are unsure of the value of task repetition.

But what happens to accuracy and errors under the pressure to speak in less and less time? This question was addressed in a study by Boers (2014) involving ten adult ESL learners performing 4–3–2 activities. As with De Jong and Perfetti (2011), Boers found fluency improvements across the iterations of the talk. However, he also found a high number of errors being repeated from the first to the third talk. He argues that this is an unintended by-product of the performance pressure created by reduced time for each talk. This pressure forces learners to fall back on verbatim duplication rather than attending to the accuracy or complexity of their
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Only a relatively small amount of knowledge is needed for successful language use (Crabbe and Nation, 1991). But as in the 4–3–2 activity, where the goal is fluency, learners need substantial opportunities for communicative practice. Indeed, as early as 1985, Brumfit suggested that “[r]ight from the beginning of the course, about a third of the total time could be spent on this sort of fluency activity, and the proportion will inevitably increase as time goes on” (1985: 12). A critical issue for English language teachers and curriculum designers is to ensure fluency opportunities are given due attention in a programme.

No account of teaching speaking skills would be complete without addressing the role of corrective feedback (CF). However, since oral CF is the sole topic of Mackey, Park and Tagarelli’s discussion in this volume, readers should refer to that chapter for a comprehensive discussion of this topic.

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The teaching of L2 writing skills has drawn extensively on trends in L1 writing pedagogy and the theories of writing on which they are based, theories drawn from fields such as composition studies, contrastive rhetoric and genre theory. However, basing L2 writing pedagogy on L1 practices fails to take sufficient account of the unique challenges of writing in a second language, a problem noted earlier in this chapter in relation to teaching listening skills. Not surprisingly, as L2 writing research emerged as a field in its own right in the 1980s, it identified differences in L1 and L2 writing processes and the challenges that learners face with regard to rhetorical preferences and command of English structure and vocabulary. As the field has developed, therefore, it has sought to critically re-evaluate the legitimacy of L2 writing instruction practices and values in reaction to the native writer bias in the source discipline of composition studies (Silva et al., 1997).

More recently, there have also been calls for L2 writing instruction to make better connections to the experience and knowledge of multilingual writers, and in so doing avoid the trap of seeing them as novice writers (Canagarajah, 2012). As Manchón (2012: 10) argues, the teaching of writing “needs to take a multilingual stance and do justice to the resources and strengths of multilingual writers”. This involves questioning the assumption that learners should appropriate the values and expectations of writing in English, an issue addressed in the New Literacy Studies movement (Barton and Hamilton, 1998). Hyland (2012: 18) captures these various strands when he observes, “modern conceptions of learning to write see writing as a social practice, embedded in the cultural and institutional contexts in which it is produced and the particular uses that are made of it.”

Among the various approaches to teaching L2 writing, process and genre approaches have been the most influential in recent years. Process approaches are probably the more influential of the two, particularly in higher education settings in North America. These approaches draw heavily on models of L1 writing, notably the cognitive process model proposed by Flower and Hayes (1981), which focus on the processes a writer goes through to produce text. Steps include planning, generating ideas, drafting, reviewing and revising, editing and publishing. Process-based writing instruction encourages learners to develop metacognitive awareness of their writing processes, reflecting on themselves as a writer and the text emerging at each writing stage. The teacher guides learners through the process and responds to emerging ideas and text with feedback, although peer response and self-reflection are also important sources of input (Hyland, 2003). A focus on language form tends to be discouraged until later in the process, reflecting misgivings over the effectiveness of corrective feedback in writing (e.g. Truscott, 1996). Recent
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research has, however, largely lent support to the positive role that feedback on grammar can play in L2 writing development (Bitchener and Ferris, 2012).

Process approaches have been criticised for being overly focused on the writer and the writer’s internal world and giving insufficient attention to the social nature of writing (Hyland, 2003, 2012). Indeed, as Ortega (2012) notes, L1 scholarship has in recent years distanced itself from the expressive orientation of process approaches in search of a more socially and politically informed understanding of writing as social literacy.

The genre approach, another influential approach to teaching L2 writing skills, emphasises the nature of writing as purposeful activity, as a way of “getting something done” (Hyland, 2003: 18). A genre is a “goal oriented, staged social process” (Hyland, 2003: 19) within which linguistic patterns and choices reflect and construct socially conventional ways of achieving a given purpose. Learning to write from a genre perspective is a process of joining a discourse community. Genre-based L2 writing instruction emphasises awareness of how texts work and encourages learners to work with a metalanguage for describing genre features and structures, whether in academic contexts (Swales, 1990; see also Starfield, and Basturkmen and Wette, this volume) or primary school classrooms (Derewianka, 1991; Ahn, 2012). Grammar awareness is encouraged for the purpose of helping learners understand how language choices serve the socially defined purpose of a text. For example, in teaching a persuasive genre, a teacher might focus on how modal verbs are used to convey levels of certainty or logical necessity in support of the text’s persuasive purpose.

A genre approach typically involves learners analysing the structure, content and language of model texts and drawing on this textual awareness to construct their own text, often jointly with the teacher (Hyland, 2003: 21). This reliance on models has drawn criticism for the way it can lead to an overly prescriptive approach to teaching writing focused on text reproduction rather than on creative, agentive writing processes (e.g. Badger and White, 2000: 157; Luke, 1996). Hyland (2003: 22) describes this as “a tension between expression and repression”.

A more recent distinction emerging in L2 writing instruction is between learning-to-write (LW) and writing-to-learn (WL) (Manchón, 2012). LW focuses on helping learners to express themselves in writing in a second language and draws on theoretical frameworks from composition studies, applied linguistics, and English for academic purposes (see Basturkmen and Wette, this volume). In contrast, WL emphasises the value of writing as a tool for learning content knowledge (i.e. in a subject such as geography) and language. WL draws on both sociocultural and cognitive SLA theorising (see Negeruera-Azarola and García, and Collins and Marsden, respectively, this volume). This distinction has proved useful regarding the contentious issue of the relevance of L2 writing research to foreign language contexts, research which, traditionally, has taken place in English-dominant countries. In this regard, Leki (2009) argues that “contrary to dogma in SL [second language] writing, with its now traditional de-emphasis of language learning, using writing to develop language proficiency may be a central aim of L2 writing in FL settings” (Manchón, 2012: 5). We can only hope that these two orientations to L2 writing instruction avoid the trap of “feeding” into compartmentalized professional or scholarly cultures and creating misalignments between teacher and student understandings of the value and roles of L2 writing” (Ortega, 2012: 237).

Future directions and concluding thoughts

The role of technology

Looking to the future, one obvious factor responsible for opening up new directions in teaching language skills is technology (see Gruba, Hinkelman and Cárdenas-Claro, and Kern, Ware and Warschauer, this volume). Indeed, the potential of new technologies is such that it would be
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difficult to find an aspect of language skill development for which a recent technological innovation is not available to deliver enhanced opportunities for English language teachers and learners. For the receptive skills, perhaps the most valuable contribution that technology offers is simply in opening up access to vast amounts of richly meaningful language input in the form of written, visual and audio-visual resources. Furthermore, thanks to technology, teachers and learners have unprecedented control over these resources. In the case of listening texts, for example, even the simplest media player provides the teacher and learner with the ability to stop, start and loop chunks of text at will. More advanced speed shifter software also allows the learner to speed up or slow down an audio recording. For reading, text-to-speech software converts written text to spoken text, and hyperlinks and online dictionaries provide rich embedded language support.

For the productive skills, technology exponentially increases opportunities for learners to practice speaking and writing and to receive immediate feedback and guidance from the teacher. For speaking, technology allows learners to analyse recordings of their voices and compare their recording to a model. Comparison can be aided by the visual display of wave forms and pitch contours, animations of the movement of articulatory organs when producing phonemes and words, and automatic conversion of the recorded speech into IPA symbols. For writing, practice is supported by the spelling and grammar checking capabilities of word processing programmes and by the editing power of writing via computer. Freely available software such as Jing allows teachers to provide multimodal feedback on writing via video screen capture software linked to voice recording. This has distinct benefits for teachers and learners. For teachers, being able to provide their feedback in spoken form saves time and allows easy elaboration. For learners, not only is the feedback more informative, but it also exposes them to meaningful spoken input.

As the term indicates, computer-mediated communication (CMC) also offers learners opportunities to develop their productive language skills through communicating online in modalities unhindered by time or space. Older forms of CMC such as email initially opened up these opportunities for writing-based communication, but Web 2.0 opened up synchronous CMC options for ‘live’ interaction via, for example, Skype, text chat, Twitter and other interactive platforms and forms of social media. Virtual worlds such as those available through Open Sim or Second Life allow teachers and communities of learners to create their own immersive learning environment. All of these capabilities are fully portable via mobile technology such as smartphones, offering even more opportunities for innovative pedagogy. Perhaps the biggest challenge for the teacher is keeping up with technological developments while avoiding being swamped by the tsunami of technological teaching options available to them.

Reframing the four skills: learning strands
This chapter has reviewed key issues in the teaching of language skills. After examining perspectives on practice and top-down and bottom-up processing, it examined critical issues and future directions in teaching the four skills. Typically, the discussion has centred on binaries such as top-down and bottom-up processes, accuracy and fluency, and writing-to-learn and learning-to-write. But, of course, a great deal of complex interplay lies behind these simple distinctions. How is the language teacher to manage these complexities? One option is to shift the focus away from skills per se and onto learning opportunities more generally. Taking this approach, Nation and Newton (2009) argue that teachers are better served by reframing the four skills within a framework of four learning strands, each representing a core type of learning opportunity. The first strand is learning through message-focused input, where the learner’s primary attention is on the ideas and messages conveyed by the language and met in listening and reading (i.e. the receptive skills). The second strand is learning through message-focused output, that is, learning
through speaking and writing (i.e. productive skills), where the learners’ attention is on conveying ideas and messages to another person. To complement these two meaning-focused strands, the third strand, learning through deliberate attention to language items and features, allows for a focus on declarative language knowledge and, for example, on the bottom-up processing skills so important in listening and reading. The fourth strand is developing fluent use of known language items. The opportunities for learning language are called strands because they can be seen as long continuous sets of learning conditions that run through a whole language programme. Balancing these four strands, according to Nation and Newton (2009), ensures learners achieve development in each skill area along with fluent control of the sounds, spelling, vocabulary, grammar and discourse features of the language that underpin these skills. It offers an approach which integrates, rather than separates, skills.

To conclude, therefore, even without deliberate attempts to integrate the four skills, they naturally co-occur in classroom practice, such as when a listening comprehension activity requires learners to read questions before listening, then answer them in writing, or when a speaking activity requires learners first to read off prompts and/or write speaking notes. Similarly, skills are not separate in learner cognition and frequently co-occur in communicative use. Thus, a learning strands approach – focusing on meaningful input and output, deliberate attention to language, and fluent language use – offers ELT professionals a deliberate and principled pathway for teaching language skills.

Discussion questions

- To what extent do the many component sub-skills of each of the four skills need to be explicitly taught? To what extent can they be left to develop intuitively through rich communicative learning experiences? How does the answer change for different groups of learners?
- How can a learner’s L1 skills and knowledge be valued and drawn on to enhance the teaching and learning of L2 language skills?
- How can the plea by researchers such as Grabe and Stoller (2011) and Field (2003) to practitioners to explicitly teach componential reading and listening skills be married to communicative and integrated teaching approaches?

Related topics

Cognitive perspectives on classroom language learning; Communicative language teaching in theory and practice; Content and language integrated learning; English for academic purposes; English for specific purposes; Errors, corrective feedback and repair; Sociocultural theory and the language classroom; Task-based language teaching.

Further reading

Field, J. (2011) Listening in the language classroom. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (This prize-winning book provides guidance on how to teach listening sub-skills, especially those focused on perceptual processes.)
Grabe, W. and Stoller, F. (2011) Teaching and researching reading (2nd ed.). New York: Pearson Longman. (This is a comprehensive treatment of reading, addressing issues of what and how to teach and how to research reading processes.)
Hyland, K. (2013) *Teaching and researching writing*. New York: Routledge. (This text explores writing pedagogy as well as providing guidance on how to carry out research on writing.)

References


Rost, M. (2011) *Teaching and researching listening* (2nd ed.). Harlow: Longman.


